

## EARLY DAYS OF GRAND OPERA IN HOUSTON AND GALVESTON

*by Joseph S. Gallegly\**

Although the first professional dramatic performance in the Republic of Texas took place in 1838, it was almost thirty years after that before an opera troupe appeared on a stage in a Texas city. There are a number of circumstances that could have accounted for this delay. When the great Madame Malibran (Signorina García) and her father introduced Italian grand opera to New York in 1821, Texas, then a Spanish colony, was hardly more than an unconquered wilderness with its few tiny settlements scattered far and wide over its broad domain. It is doubtful that the Garcías would have been interested in a visit to Texas even after San Jacinto, as many noted players were; the Garcías had wrinkled a contumelious nostril at the thought of penetrating the Eastern interior beyond New York City. And in the 'fifties, after Texas had acquired statehood, and Jenny Lind, on her memorable excursion through the States, came as near the former republic as New Orleans, cultured Galveston, the leading city of the state at the time, lacked both impressario and theatre of proper appointments for the accommodation of orchestra and singers. Opera managers were as circumspect in those days as Mr. Bing is in ours; only a Caruso in the most populous centers has ever made grand opera pay in the United States. The country has no Vienna or Milan. A small-town playhouse manager must indeed be bold and desperate to make the hazardous venture of booking a grand opera company for a season at his theatre.

Mrs. Harry Hunter of Galveston appears to have been just such a person.<sup>1</sup> She was the most interesting and in many ways the most successful promoter in Galveston's postbellum theatrical renaissance. This "fascinating and wicked little witch," as the *Galveston News* (February 26, 1871) called her, began her brief but noteworthy career by transforming the upper floor of the old Neitch theatre building into a well-appointed and comfortable playhouse. By hundred-dollar loans, she raised the money she needed, and (as the *News*, possibly reporter William Pitt Ballinger, roguishly explained)

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while the loans were never repaid, when the little lady left Galveston she was not in debt to many of her creditors. She brought in opera chairs to replace the "horrible" pine benches previously in use in amusement places in the city, took out the roller-type scenery and replaced it with the newer flats, and, an accomplishment of much greater note, brought Italian grand opera to Texas for the first time.

It had been Mrs. Hunter's intention to reserve her house for legitimate drama after the style of the Varieties theatre of New Orleans; but just as she was about to open, an agent of the Ronconi Opera troupe, then in the Crescent City, arrived in Galveston. His company was near disaster because of the rigors of the Lenten season in the river metropolis. Mrs. Hunter's sharp eyes perceived his desperate state; she let him have her old muslin-draped box of a playhouse for \$300 a night. It was a happy turn of circumstances for both parties, and a lucky stroke of fate for Galveston theatregoers.

The opening of the season, of course, was memorable. The opera of the evening (April 5, 1867) was Verdi's *Ernani*. The people of taste and fashion of the wealthy little city of 22,500 turned out in their finest attire.<sup>2</sup> "Old Neitch's," as ugly as a toad on the outside, must have sparkled brilliantly within. We learn from *Flake's Bulletin* that the "toilettes of the ladies would have satisfied even the critical eyes in those cities which assume to be the centers of elegance." We shall let *Flake's* critic tell us of the opening.

The opera opened coldly. The overture to *Ernani* is not particularly inspiring, nor did it ever seem to us a fit preparation for the scenes following. When the curtain rose on the banditti scene with its drinking chorus, the audience was not taken by the storm as it had hoped to be, and so the singers had evidently anticipated. The feeling of the audience seemed to be, "Now, Senors Italiani, you think we are a parcel of country bumpkins, and know nothing of music, but we will let you know a deuced sight better. We will sit motionless as rocks rather than applaud anything that is not of first quality." This feeling was enhanced on the appearance of Ernani, signor [Alessandro] Boetti, who was out of health and out of voice. Matters were not mended by the fact that Signora Catinari, the prima donna of the night, was troubled with a slight cold. The ladies of the audience were evidently disappointed with the cantata, "Ernani, Ernani, involami," which was perfectly familiar to hundreds, who had never seen the opera, as a parlor piece. But just at this point the whole performance seemed to change, and for the third scene to the last not one word of censure can be justly urged. There appeared all at once a better understanding. Before this, the audience had suspected that some spurious company was being palmed off on them and the company appeared to feel that exertion was unnecessary to please people who were supposed to know nothing of music. Both hallucinations disappeared at the third scene and from [then on] the audience were as appreciative and the company as careful as could be wished.<sup>3</sup>

Signor Luigi Rocco of the troupe was a basso of great celebrity. On several occasions he was said to have appeared with the noted diva, Henrietta Sontag, and had been prominent in Boston and New York in the 'fifties.

Alessandro Boetti was also well known in reputable circles. Other singers were Signor Ottaviani, baritone; Signor Fabbio, and Signoras Carlotta Catinari, Elisa Tomasi, and Catterina, prima donnas. Besides *Ernani*, *La Traviata*, Flotow's *Martha*, and Vincenzo Bellini's two works, *La Sonnambula* and *Norma* were given during the engagement. Signora Tomasi (the *News* said) was splendid as Violetta in *La Traviata*; her conception of the character as an unsettled creature given to hysterics was said to be near the composer's intention.

*Norma*, which was presented on the evening of April 10, with the company in its full strength, was thought to be the best effort of the singers. A driving rain, as the *News* was to declare the following day, "poured as from a hundred teapots" on the umbrellas of the audience, who sat spell-bound while Adelgisa (Signora Tomasi) confessed her love for the faithless Pollione, and Norma (Signora Catinari), enraged at the treachery of the Roman, strikes the sacred shield and summons the Druids to war. "An audience that will sit in a dripping rain to hear an Italian opera," the *News* commented further, "is worth cultivating." And *Flake's Bulletin* (April 11, 1867) declared that, "We shall reserve our opinion of the theatre itself for other times, as the rain falling with inconceivable want of respect on the heads of many of the fairer sex, shows plainly enough that there must be something rotten in the state of Denmark." Neither journal observed that Madame Catinari experienced any difficulty in rendering the great air, "Casta diva." Bellini, it was said, had rewritten this aria nine times before he made it acceptable to the famous Guiditta Pasta, who was to create the role of Norma.

The singers returned to the city after a short stay in Houston, and, having to wait for their ship to leave the island, gave *Lucretia Borgia* on the 16th of April; and on the 18th, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, the latter as a triple benefit: for Mme. Tomasi, for the new parsonage at the Baptist church, and for the Roman Catholic Sisters of Charity for a new hospital.

The season was in every way a success. On only one of the eight nights did the receipts drop below \$1000. *Ernani* played to \$1500, and *Norma* to \$1200. *Flake's* was elated—eight successful nights of opera! "Only when citizens are given . . . squalling for music . . . do they refuse to patronize the playhouses."

At Perkins' Opera House, in Houston, the Ronconi troupe presented *La Traviata* (April 11), and *Il Trovatore* the following evening. A critic of the Houston *Telegraph* (April 12, 1867) found Mme. Catinari impressive as Leonora. He likened her voice to "rare, good old wine, that exhilarates the soul and steepes the senses in a dream of luxurious pain." Signor Boetti's voice was noted as strong, lovely, and melodious. But the attendance on both evenings was scanty; in fact, the company lost money—lost so much that they went back to Galveston leaving their advertising bills unpaid.

The *Telegraph* thought the prices asked for seats were so high that lovers of song and music were discouraged from attending; but *Flake's Bulletin* had a different notion of why the Ronconi people failed to draw in the rival city.

The smallest receipts for one night in Galveston (a little under a thousand) were thrice the largest received in Houston. We make no comment. We draw no inferences. Galveston supports any entertainment of merit and character . . . .

With the arrival at Galveston of the New Orleans Opera Company on March 30, 1868, music lovers had hopes of a yearly opera season being established in the city. The company, with Mme. Zelda Seguin as the star, opened with *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Mme. Seguin impressed her listeners as chaste, neat, and talented, with a cultured voice of great sweetness. In the mad aria she exhibited a high order of dramatic power. The Sextette was admirably given, and Messrs. Pecot, Lechavelier, and Tholer were found pleasing in their roles. Chairs had been placed in the gallery, the back of the theatre (which was Greenwall's first) relighted with new gas fixtures, and all seats in the house put on sale at \$3. But the place was not full on the opening night (*Blake's Bulletin*, April 1, 1868), many persons perhaps staying away because they thought they would be unable to find good seats.

*The Daughter of the Regiment*, given the second night, drew a larger crowd. Mme. Seguin made a better Marie than she had a Lucia. Her exaggerated manner of doing the singing lesson in Act II drew favorable comment from both *Flake's* and the *News* (April 1). The only encore of the evening followed her singing of the "Salute la France." M. Tholer showed an aptness in the portrayal of old men in the way he did the whimsical Hortensias, and Mme. Bondro was equally skilled in her interpretation of the Marchioness. *Il Trovatore* (April 1) produced the finest opera night ever known in the city, and the house, according to *Flake's* (April 2), was large enough to pay expenses! Mlle. Fanschetti, the Leonora of the evening, exhibited an expressive and powerful voice. The "Anvil Chorus" was thought to lack spirit, however, and the "Miserere" was rendered without feeling. In *Faust* (April 2) only the lack of strength and volume of Mme. Seguin's cultured voice kept her from portraying a perfect Marguerite. Mme. Audebret as Leonora in Donizetti's *La Favorita* failed to arouse the same enthusiasm that she had raised with her Azucena. Only in the exquisite air, "O Mio Fernando," did she find sufficient scope for the sweetness and melody of her contralto. M. Picot (Ferdinand) made his best showing of the engagement with the rich melody, "Ah! va t'in vola."

At the request of some interested citizens, *Flake's* informs us (April 7), the season was extended for three more nights, closing on April 10. Of

the three final operas—*Jerusalem*, *The Barber of Seville*, and *William Tell* (the last called Mme. Seguin's "selva opaco")—none drew especially well. After closing at Galveston, the company went to Houston for a short engagement.<sup>1</sup>

The grand opera of the season 1868–1869 was furnished by a German troupe under the management of H. Grau. The company was made up of the following "grand talent stars": prima donna Clara Ziegler, great lyric singer; prima donna secunda, Mathilde Bergner; Franz Himmer, greatest dramatic and heroic tenor in the United States; Johann Armand, "sweet voiced" tenor; Heinrich Steinecke, baritone; Joseph Weinlich, the unsurpassed Sarastro of *The Magic Flute*; William Bach, famous basso buffo. The company carried a full chorus, with an orchestra under the direction of A. Predigam.

The engagement began on January 18, 1869 with a performance of *Martha*, which was declared the finest presentation the city had ever witnessed—a statement not to be taken too lightly now that Galveston was in its third opera season. *Flake's Bulletin* (January 19) declared Himmer the equal of the great Mario, leading tenor of the '50's, and he could well have been. Clara Ziegler's voice was praised for its melody and strength. In *Fra Diavolo* (January 19) Mme. Ziegler let her voice drop too low at times and seemed too gay in the prayer scene—or so the writer in *Flake's* thought. *Der Freishütz* was staged with surprising scenic effects; in *Faust* the duet between Faust and Marguerite (the incomparable Friderici), "The Hour is Late, Adieu," was excellently rendered; the prison scene also was well executed. In *Il Trovatore*, Johann Armand, an understudy for the ill Franz Himmer, made just a fair Manrico. Two performances of *The Magic Flute* (January 23) gave Josef Weinlich, the "unsurpassed Sarastro," ample chance to demonstrate his matchless bass voice.

Houston had the pleasure of hearing the German Opera company before they appeared at Galveston. The company opened at Perkins' Opera House on January 15, 1869 with *Martha*. The critiques appearing in *The Telegraph* throw little light on how these operas were received or how well attended they were. One suspects that the critic, unversed in music, could think of nothing to say beyond the barest comments. The audience that saw *Martha*, the first night, was "fashionable," and, we may hope, large. Clara Lang Ziegler as Martha "sang sweetly"; Marie Friderici "was perfection"; and Franz Himmer was "in fine voice and sang splendidly," all of which, knowing the singers, we might have deduced. *Fra Diavolo* and *The Magic Flute* were given at the matinee and evening performances the next day. The music alone, *The Telegraph* declared, was worth the price of admission.

The celebrated tenor, Pasquale Brignoli, and the soprano, Isabella McCulloch, were the principals of the opera company of the 1870 season. Brignoli had a voice of great volume and sweetness, and was unrivalled

in grace of execution and facility of phrasing.<sup>5</sup> He had been a dominant figure in opera circles in Europe and America for a quarter-century. On the eve of his arrival in Galveston, the *News* recounted an anecdote illustrative of a kind of embarrassment the great singer often experienced. While in Denver on an occasion with the soprano Christine Nilsson, the diva suffered a slight indisposition that affected her voice. Brignoli offered to go before the curtain to explain her condition to the audience. "Madame Nilsson ees a leetle horse tonight," he said. "Why don't you trot her out, then?" cried a wag from the upper tiers.

The noted signor was in perfect control of his "sweet, silver voice" when he and his company opened with *Martha* at the Casino Hall on the evening of February 16th. *Flake's* critic (February 17, 1870) refrained from going into particulars about Brignoli and contented himself with declaring merely that "of Signor Brignoli it is scarcely necessary to speak; renowned the world over, he is almost outside the pale of criticism." But of Miss McCulloch he found that she gave most satisfaction in the serious parts of the opera. "Her voice, taste and feelings are all better suited to the heavier and more serious music." Miss Antonia Henne, billed as the talented American contralto, Signor Petrelli, baritone, and Signor P. Giorza, pianist, were other notable members of the company.

In commenting on Miss McCulloch's assumption of the role of Lucia (*Lucia di Lammermoor*, February 17th), *Flake's* analyst thought the part much better suited to her means than *Martha*; he observed, moreover, that the piano used by the orchestra was so bad that it should be thrown into the street. Brignoli was found to be in better health, or better voice, or better spirits than on the previous night.

In *Lucrezia Borgia* it was noted that not only did Miss McCulloch show the critical accuracy which she had bestowed on *Martha* and *Lucia*, but she added fire, sentiment, and passion, qualities that she had previously shown a lack of. The reviewer failed to see the warmth of feeling in the aria, "Come e bello" (where *Lucrezia* approaches the sleeping Gennaro), that Mary Gladstone had infused into the dramatic presentation. The fine, cultured voice of Brignoli (the Gennaro of the night) was heard at its best in the duet with *Lucrezia* that concludes the opera.<sup>6</sup>

The company was heard in a concert of sacred music on Sunday, February 20, and ended their stay with *The Barber of Seville* the next evening. In this last performance, Miss McCulloch's rendition of the Swiss echo song in the music lesson failed (*Flake's* thought) because of the narrow dimensions of Casino Hall. Brignoli drew much applause from the auditors with the ballad, "Good Bye, Sweetheart, Good Bye," an interpolated piece that had been composed expressly for him.<sup>7</sup>

On February 11th, the *Houston Telegraph* wondered if it would not be worth the while of some speculative genius to try to bring the Brignoli



opera company to Houston for a few nights. The Messrs. Greenwall, Galveston theatre managers, did succeed in bringing the troupe over for one night only. The opera presented was *Martha*. Houston still had a long way to go to supplant Galveston as the cultural center of the Gulf coast.

Towards the end of the '70-'71 season (more precisely, on April 30, 1871), the Galveston *News* expressed the hope that the excellent opera company then playing in New Orleans would "cross the pond" for a run of a week or ten days in the new Tremont theatre. The journal noted that "the European war" (the Franco-Prussian conflict) had driven a number of operatic stars from Europe to the States. The company three weeks or so later entertained Galvestonians for a short season extending from May 22 to June 1. We can find very little about these French singers, or what they did. A "large and elegant audience" saw Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* on May 22.<sup>8</sup> De Kegnle, a light tenor, was recorded as having a pure and melodious voice, but was thought too cold for a lover. M. Dumestre, who assumed the role of Figaro, and Mme. Naddi, prima donna, were praised for their work.<sup>9</sup> Others of the performers were Vallee, Dubosc, Caralp, Boudro, Cartier, Perie, and Bertron. *Lucia di Lammermoor* (May 23), *La Dame Blanche*, *Rigoletto* (May 26), *Guillaume Tell* (May 29), and *Mignon* (May 31) were the other operas presented.

A small Italian opera company of solo artists performed the chief arias, duets, and trios of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La Traviata*, and *Lucrezia Borgia*, according to the *News* (April 17), in a short season starting April 16, 1872. This same group, which the Houston *Telegraph* (April 26) called the Italian Operatic Concert Combination (April 23 to 25), closed the theatrical season at Perkins' playhouse. The journal reported that the performances were but meagerly attended.

Opera had a more precarious season in Galveston in 1874 than it had ever known on the island. After overmuch persuading and the dangling of all sorts of lures and posting of guarantees, Henry Greenwall induced a French opera company playing in New Orleans to visit the city on March 30. Some of the artists of the troupe were M. Gueyward, Grand Opera House, Paris; M. De Guercy, Theatre Lyrique, Paris; Mme. Gabrielle Moisset, Grand Opera House, Paris; and M. Monas, leader of the orchestra. The troupe was heard first (March 30) in *Il Trovatore*, the excellent vocalization, the *News* said, stirring the usually undemonstrative Galveston opera-lovers to unbounded enthusiasm. It was added that opera is both an elevating influence and evidence of refinement and taste. M. Monas, the director, drew praise for "holding every instrument to its perfect work, and not letting any get beyond his controlling grasp."<sup>10</sup> When *Lucia di Lammermoor* was given the next night, the grand sextet, "Chi me frena," was called "a perfect whirlwind of passion and tumultuous melody." *La Favorita* and *La Traviata* followed (April 1 and 2), with a matinee to start at twelve

on April 3 so that the singers could board ship for New Orleans. But the audience was so thin an hour before the matinee was to start that manager Greenwall would not advance the \$500 the troupe demanded. He had already lost \$2000 and did not feel like increasing the deficit. However, Galveston businessmen with two benefits amply compensated the manager for the losses he had incurred.<sup>11</sup>

The most cultured and refined of Galveston society comprised the larger part of the critical auditors who greeted Mlle. Ilma di Murska on April 1, 1875. This genius with a rare voice, the Hungarian nightingale, filled the house twice, with parquette seats selling at \$2.50. And the noted cantatrice was worth every penny of the price. She was spoken of as a "dazzling executant of all the quips and quiddities of *fioritura*."<sup>12</sup> For her Galveston engagement she sang arias from *Semiramide*, *L'Elisir d'Amore*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The *News* spoke with pride of how the talented and critical portion of the citizenry liberally patronized entertainments that accorded with their tastes. Di Murska "scales to the dizzy heights and with as much ease trips across the register with fairy gracefulness."<sup>13</sup>

In Houston, the day before her Galveston appearance (March 31), Mlle. di Murska had been forced to endure the annoying behavior of the "gallery roughs." Deputy Marshal Buck Johnston and two day-policemen had much ado to keep the uncultured characters at bay. The celebrated diva, however, enraptured the cultured segment of the audience (according to *The Telegraph* of April 1) with the arias "Come per me Sereno," "Sovra il Sen," and the melodies of "Ah! non Credea," and "Ah! non Giunge."

Caroline Richings-Bernard with her Grand English Opera combination opened the opera season on December 4, 1876. In Flotow's *Martha*, the initial performance of the engagement, Mrs. Bernard's voice (said the *News* critic, December 5) appeared to be a trifle worn after her thirty years before the footlights, but it still had clarity and compass, and her execution was noteworthy.<sup>14</sup> Her singing of *The Last Rose of Summer* was warmly received and encored. After witnessing *The Bohemian Girl* (December 5), the *News* declared that it was evident "that the forte of the two leading voices lay not in tragic but rather in that debatable province known as genteel comedy in histrionics and mezza-drama in opera."

*The Marriage of Figaro* (December 6) offered the dramatic critic of the *News* (December 7) a chance to weigh the merits of the troupe.

The difference between Balfe [the composer of *The Bohemian Girl*] and Mozart is something like that between the aurora borealis and the sun. The former can be easily imitated; the latter is almost impossible to represent. The orchestration and concerted action at once remind the listener of the immense superiority of the great tone-master to the disciples of the modern schools who "wash in" their background without much regard to either harmony or unity. Such music is therefore comparatively difficult and the full effect can only be obtained from the joint movement of well trained vocalists with a powerful orchestra. Since one does not expect great things of a company so weak



in numbers and deficient in choral strength in comparison with those grand combinations in Paris, Berlin, or even New York—why, then should we hesitate to give the meed of praise to this really talented and spirited group?

The troupe seemed to be especially happy in giving expression to the airy lightness of *Maritana* (December 7), with which opera they achieved an unquestioned triumph. Mrs. Bernard's voice showed no signs of the severe strain to which it was nightly subjected. The medley, "What Muster," drew the greatest applause. A splendid presentation of *Il Trovatore* (December 8) revealed unsuspected powers of the troupe for grand opera. Mr. Bernard's acting, as the Count di Luna, as well as his fine singing, enabled him deservedly to share honors with his wife, who reminded her listeners (principally in her *sostenuto* power) of Carlotti Patti. The orchestra's lack of clarinet and horns somewhat marred the totality of effect produced by that body's accomplishments.<sup>15</sup>

Manager Gregor, of the Perkins Theatre of Houston (according to the *Telegraph* of December 11, 1876) got three hundred people to sign for seats at \$1.50 each and persuaded the Caroline Richings-Bernard Opera troupe to come up from Galveston. *Martha* and *Il Trovatore* were the operas the signers asked for. In *Il Trovatore* (December 11) Mrs. Bernard was termed "the standard of perfection" (certainly a laudatory phrase) in her great assumption of the part of Leonora; Harry Gates was fully "equal to the demands" as Manrico; and Hattie Moore "fulfilled requirements" of the heavy part of Azucena. Thus did the *Telegraph* (December 12) assess the merits of the opera company. Mr. Gregor apparently neglected to fulfill his requirements in the matter of seating, for many ticket holders were not given the seats they had paid for. The next night, when *Martha* was presented, we may suppose that ticket holders had their seating requirements satisfied—as well as their operatic tastes. We may so suppose, for of how the night passed we can find no record.

The nearest Galveston came to witnessing opera during the 1877-1878 season was when Mlle. Ilma di Murska presented her concerts which began on April 25. The noted Hungarian, on this return visit, was assisted by Signori Brignoli and Susini. We are not told what di Murska sang the first night, but the *News* (April 26) informed its readers that the diva "had the misfortune to swallow an inspired mosquito in quest of the source of so much melody." She soon rallied from the mishap, however, and "gave exquisite illustrations of the grand compass and cultural splendors of her magnificent voice." A feature of the visit was the troupe's singing at high mass, Sunday, April 28, at the Cathedral. Mlle. di Murska sang an Ave Maria composed especially for her by a Mr. John Hill, apparently of the city; Brignoli rendered the tenor solo, "Cujus Animam," from Rossini's *Stabat Mater*; and Susini sang "The Prayer" from Verdi. The troupe con-

cluded their engagement, as well as the season, that Sunday night at the Tremont.

Mlle. di Murska furnished Houstonians on April 29 with what the *Telegraph* the next day called the "only really good musical entertainment our city has known this season" (1878). A full and appreciative house listened to "Carnival of Venice" (an air from *La Reine Topaze*), "The Last Rose of Summer," and, the hit of the evening, "Luce de quest Anima" from the opera *Linda*. Two weeks later the brilliant concert singer and her company were back in the city. On this second visit, the troupe gave the opera *Norma*, which, despite the lack of a full orchestra and chorus, the *Telegraph* (May 14) pronounced a success. The following evening (May 14), the last of the season, Mlle. di Murska appeared in concert at Manager Gregor's benefit performance.

When the Hess Grand Opera Company came (February 10, 1879) and presented Emma Abbott, as Mignon, Galveston had its introduction to an entertainer who was to be a favorite in the city for years to come. Although never high in the esteem of the critics of the big centers, Emma Abbott, during the twenty years of her professional career, enjoyed a popularity in the provinces that reportedly enabled her to amass over a million dollars. Miss Abbott opened with Ambroise Thomas' *Mignon*. As to how the little native American diva performed on that night we can discover from a critique printed at the time in the *News* (February 11).

Emma Abbott as Mignon is an evidence of art surpassing nature, and it can be said with truth that the most fastidious conception of the rôle must have been fully satisfied with her rendition. Whether it is that remembrance of her miserably romantic youth aids her in this character or whether it is only her genius which gives such a tinge of nature to her acting is a matter which can be better decided when she is heard in other rôles. Her voice is not strong, but singularly clear and sweet, with a rich mellow timbre that ranks it high in quality.

The artiste was heard in a variety of parts. As was expected, she made her greatest hit as Marguerite in *Faust* (February 14). She was especially commended for her successful assumption, since this popular role was one which so few could properly portray. Marguerite was considered a difficult study because, as an opera authority once said, it combines so much of the sweet and lovely with the dreadful and tragic.<sup>16</sup>

The following year (1880) Emma Abbott returned to the Tremont Opera House with her own company, an organization that included the great Pasqualino Brignoli and the celebrated Julie Rosenwald of Dresden. On October 19 Miss Abbott sang Lucia with Signor Brignoli as Sir Edgar Ravenswood. The *News* (October 20, 1880) called Brignoli one of the finest tenors of the operatic stage, and found words of praise for "divine Emma's" perfect vocalization and dramatic ability in the mad scene and her power in the sextet.

It was during this engagement that Miss Abbott presented in Texas for the first time *Paul and Virginia*, an opera based on the romantic novel of that name by Bernadin de Saint-Pierre. Only *Romeo and Juliet* of the troupe's notable presentations failed to please. Juliet seemed to lack the appeal of Lucia or Virginia; the opera (declared the *News*, October 21) was simply too tame and was lacking in grand music and plaintive melody.

Unlike many other stars in the operatic firmament, Emma Abbott showed no inclination to jealousy. In *Il Trovatore* (the number with which the company closed its stay on the 21st), the American "idol of song" seemed willing to yield her place as first soprano to the European, Mme. Rosenwald. This world-renowned cantatrice, with voice of great power and culture, as Leonora, shared honors with Brignoli, the Manrico of the evening.

As the years passed, Emma Abbott's popularity grew. In the mid-'eighties in Kansas City only Edwin Booth could draw better than she; and she was just as popular in Memphis. In Houston and Galveston she regularly filled the box-office till. Age seemed to mellow her voice and strengthen her art; as the Memphis *Appeal* said of her in 1890, "The famous lark notes have lost none of their melody."<sup>17</sup>

In preparation for the 1889-1890 season, the last in which Miss Abbot visited Texas, she paid Worth and Felix, noted dress designers of Paris, over \$100,000 for costumes to wear principally in *Ernani* and *The Rose of Castile*. "It seems wicked to spend so much money on a wardrobe," she said at this time.<sup>18</sup> But her audiences had learned to look for elegant dressing in her roles and consequently she felt that she should not disappoint them. Galveston women gaped in wonder at the costumes the diva wore in Verdi's *Ernani*. There was the wheat dress in yellow and black; the gold dress of white satin, embroidered in golden birds and vines and leaves; an exquisite white moire bridal dress, embroidered in silver; and the costume worn in the last act—of black satin brocade, with a laurel leaf design in velvet and gold embroidery. Worth, who had made a dress just like it for the Queen of Portugal, charged Miss Abbott \$7000 for the creation.<sup>19</sup>

Of the opera itself, in which the star appeared as Elvira on the night of December 30, the *News* (December 31) had much to say in praise.

*Ernani* was a triumph last night before a large and fashionable audience. Never before has Galveston been treated to such an artistic performance of opera, nor one so magnificently costumed. Emma Abbott herself not only sang with her usual sweetness, but with an additional power of tone and an intensity of feeling which materially increased the magnetic charm she always exercises over audiences. The aria, "Ernani, fly with me," received due acclaim.

In Balfe's *The Rose of Castile* (December 31) the little American star exhibited an even more engaging stage presence than she had shown hitherto. She was said to have sung her role that night with great feeling and magnetic power and to have made a "stately, beautiful, and loving

queen and vivacious peasant"; but this chronicler wonders if her gorgeous costumes did not have a great share in winning her acclaim for the personation of the evening. The "Grape Dress," worn in the Balfe opera, was the most magnificent of the complete set of the diva's Worth and Felix creations. This garment was of heliotrope satin, with a garnishment of royal purple velvet and embroidery. The foot of the skirt and train were a mass of grapevines trailing as naturally and gracefully as if they were actual vines and not counterfeits. Vines and tendrils were in gold, and the bunches of the ripe fruit were of purple velvet in appliqué, with green, outlined and veined in gold.<sup>20</sup>

The *News* (January 2) could find nothing good to say of *The Yeoman of the Guard*, with which the company closed on New Year's day. "There's absolutely nothing in it," the paper said; "it is very little removed from being actually stupid."

Etelka Gerster, a talented Hungarian soprano, who could charm and fascinate rather than awe, and who was important enough to excite the envy of the great Adelina Patti, came to Galveston on her first visit to the United States, but only after L. E. Spencer, the Tremont Opera House manager, had made her a guarantee of \$1500 for her share in the performances of the two nights in which she was to appear (January 19, 20, 1882). Mme. Gerster had taken up her profession on the advice of Verdi; the great composer had been impressed with her singing of a part in *Aïda*. She rather soon thereafter gained prominence as a charming cantatrice of perfect musical taste. She was often praised as a representative of the "old school." It is told of her that once while on tour in America with Patti, the aged governor of Missouri, in a burst of enthusiasm, kissed the great Adelina. Gerster, when asked her opinion of this frivolous indiscretion, replied that she saw no harm in a man kissing a woman old enough to be his mother.<sup>21</sup>

The *News* (January 21) was chary in its praise of Etelka Gerster. She was dismissed with the simple statement: she was brilliant as Rosina in *The Barber of Seville* and in the grand aria finale from *La Sonnambula*.

And there was, of course, among the singers of celebrity, Adelina Patti herself.<sup>22</sup> Her coming to the Tremont (December 23, 1886) was hailed as the "event of the century." Appearing in concert, the most notable of notables sang, among other selections, "Ah, forse è Lui," from *La Traviata* and the waltz, *Il Bacio*, composed by Luigi Arditti, who accompanied Patti as her conductor. In rendering the aria as Violetta, the diva wore her \$500,000 jewelled gown, an engaging Worth creation. The singer also rendered two selections from *Faust*, one of which (with Mme. Scalchi) was the duet, "Tardi si fa."<sup>23</sup>

Prices for all seats at the Patti concert were substantially raised in order to pay the star the \$6000 she requested for the concert. The amount was

a thousand above the usual "take." Galveston was to be her only stop between New Orleans and Mexico City.<sup>24</sup> Madame Sofia Scalchi, prima donna contralto, assisted Patti on this Galveston visit, the programme of which announced that the "eternal and divine" Adelina was on "positively her last tour" of the United States.<sup>25</sup> Mme. Scalchi, however, who was some years younger than the forty-three year old "great one" whom she assisted, was to make other appearances in the city.

To Miss Emma Juch goes the distinction of having introduced Richard Wagner to the Houston and Galveston stages. The notable event occurred in Houston on January 11, 1892, at the Sweeney and Coombs opera house. The Wagnerian opera was an innovation to Houston opera-goers and the Houston *Post* drama critic suspected that the audience of the night might not have understood the "Leitmotif" of the noted German composer. Speaking of *Tannhäuser* (the opera presented on this memorable occasion), the journal sought to enlighten its readers.

The music is not a sort to catch the popular ear, and the motif is not easily understood by those unacquainted with the opera. *Tannhäuser* is unlike any other opera. It depends more than any other for contrasting tone-colors upon the separate and independent use of the distinct classes of instruments that comprise the orchestra—and such is the effect of instrumentation that one is satisfied to listen to the melody made by the orchestra when the voices are silent.<sup>26</sup>

A day or so later at the Tremont, the *News* found the Galvestonians who attended the opening performance as appreciative and as able to understand *Tannhäuser* as they would have been of a composition by Verdi or Mozart. The weather was so disagreeable that a scheduled matinee presentation of *Cavalleria Rusticana* had to be cancelled; but the large audience which braved the storm at night found that Miss Juch had a grand soprano voice that brought out "all the beauties of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* with decided effect." There was no mention even of subtleties, much less a complaint of being confused or bewildered by the German composer's new concept of opera. Miss Juch's rendering of the entrance song in Act II, "Oh, Hall of Song," was warmly acclaimed. The duet (with Miss Juch as Elizabeth and William Stephens as Tannhäuser), and especially the prayer, "Oh, Blessed Virgin," in the last act, "elicited a storm of applause." The praise was meant chiefly for Miss Juch, for William Stephens was spoken of as "hardly ordinary."<sup>27</sup>

Minnie Hauk, a distinguished interpreter of operatic roles, with a European as well as American reputation, was first heard in Galveston during the Mardi Gras season of 1884.<sup>28</sup> The *News* called her appearance at the Tremont (February 29, March 1) "one of the most brilliant musical events in Galveston's history." This American-born cantatrice, who had created the role of Carmen in London where she had won acclaim both for her vocal and histrionic gifts, demonstrated her "quality" in Galveston through



the medium of concert. She sang arias from *Carmen* and *Faust*, and was especially commended for her rendition of the "vision of Elsa" from *Lohengrin*, "Comin' Thro' the Rye," and the "Echo Song" from Mignon. It was noted in her first concert, when she offered as encore the "little song, 'Beware,'" she made "a slight display of her qualities as an actress—in a pretty little scene in which she ungrooved and took her seat at the piano."<sup>29</sup>

Miss Hauk also scored a minor triumph at Pillot's Opera House in Houston. And she did this partly because her accompanist did wonders on an old upright piano that was badly out of tune. She and members of her company performed the quartette from *Rigoletto*. The *Post* spoke of her "clear, sweet and melodious voice as giving evidence of perfect schooling and artistic training."<sup>30</sup>

Marie Tavary, whose Grand English Opera Company began an engagement at Galveston, February 6, 1895, was overshadowed on the occasion by tenor A. J. Guille.<sup>31</sup> Miss Tavary was heard as Leonora and Mr. Guille as Manrico in the opening performance of *Il Trovatore*. Many in the audience recalled Mr. Guille as the accomplished young singer who had visited the city with Adelina Patti eight years before. The *News* had words of praise for Guille's splendid effort and commented on how the soft, liquid flow of his Italian contrasted with the harshness of the English of the other members of the cast. For Miss Tavary herself, the journal observed that her introduction as Leonora "was not under the most auspicious circumstances." There was a strong inclination to feel that she was saved by a considerate orchestra leader.<sup>32</sup>

On the following evening, *Carmen* was the opera. In the title role of the offering was starred a mysterious creature under the name of Thea Dorre. It was reported that she travelled with the company only to play Carmen. Her bird-like mezzo-soprano drew praise from an audience that had ventured out in the coldest weather Galveston had known in more than twenty years.<sup>33</sup>

The Tavary company gave an interesting version of *Tannhäuser*, and closed with a double Saturday-matinee bill of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*.<sup>34</sup>

Madame Sofia Scalchi, eccentric and temperamental, yet withal one of the greatest contraltos of all time, honored Houston and Galveston with her presence in the closing years of the century. The first of the series of her visits as a star occurred on November 25, 1897. This prima donna, who had gone into hysterics and taken to bed with sickness over the death of her favorite parrot (which feathered songster had travelled with her for many years before his death), was declared to possess a voice of fine quality and unlimited range, "every note in its compass of two and a half octaves being of a wonderfully soft yet penetrating power." Patti, it was



said, feared her as a rival. In private life Mme. Scalchi was the Countess Singi Lolli of Turin.<sup>35</sup>

Madame Scalchi is deserving of mention here because of her celebrity as an operatic prima donna, although she appeared in Galveston and Houston in concert with a company of four and only in acts of operas.<sup>36</sup> A standing-room audience heard her and her associates in acts from *Faust* and *Il Trovatore*. The lady was declared to have made a striking appearance, dressed "with a white satin brocade entrain and waist and short sleeves of cerise velvet. Jeweled bracelets were worn over long gloves." The absence of a full orchestra was tolerated, of course, but found disconcerting by the enthusiastic listeners. The latter discovered that a piano was a poor substitute for strings and winds.<sup>37</sup>

In Houston three days later, the Scalchi company created but a modest stir in the operatic firmament. The fair-sized group of opera lovers who attended the presentation of the second act of *Martha* and the fourth of *Il Trovatore* was "duly appreciative." That was all the *Post* could say about the performance.<sup>38</sup>

Two years later Madame Scalchi drew a large audience in spite of visiting Galveston in the Lenten season. She was found especially appealing as Arsace in her song, "Once More I see Thee, Babylonia," from Rossini's masterpiece, *Semiramide*. She sang also the contralto parts in quartettes of von Flotow's *Martha*: "This is Your Future Dwelling," "What a Charming Occupation," and "The Last Rose of Summer." Madame Scalchi's forty-eight years seemed rather to have mellowed than weakened her voice.<sup>39</sup>

At the close of the century, Galveston could lay claim at least to having played a modest part in the establishment of grand opera as a phase of culture in the United States. The little island town was for many years the largest in Texas. To encourage people of the interior to trade with them, Galveston businessmen gave substantial support to drama and grand opera. It was their belief that if customers found the best obtainable amusement at a playhouse in Texas, they would not feel the need of "hopping across the pond" or, later, "taking the rails," to New Orleans. Theatre managers were not afraid to take risks in booking notable performers; if their treasuries showed deficits at the end of a season, their generous backers, the merchants, would compliment them with "benefit performances" that would amply compensate them for any losses they had incurred.<sup>40</sup>

Houston was to take its place as a cultural center only after 1900.

## NOTES

1. Mrs. Harry Hunter was the wife of Harry Hunter, the clever pantomimist of the Lone Fisherman fame in the burlesque, *Evangeline*. Laurence Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage* (New York, 1891), III, 192.

2. *Flake's Bulletin* of October 11, 1867, in an article on the yellow fever epidemics

that had ravaged Galveston through the years, listed the figure given as the population of the city at the time.

3. About the opera troupe itself, this journal's reporter commented with exuberance: "Never saw so many trunks! Sixty-five people! Some say half were left at New Orleans. What can sixty-five people be doing with so many clothes? The entire space between the private boxes is filled with orchestra, and when we called at the theatre the director was still demanding more room. If any want to know how the confusion of the tongues of Babel sounded, he should have been at the theatre this morning." April 6, 1867.

4. No records of this visit of the opera troupe to Houston are available.

5. Pasquale Brignoli, who was born in Naples in 1824, and died in New York, October 30, 1884, came to America in 1855 with Max Strakosh. His voice in his best days was a tenor of great volume and sweetness, and even in his sixtieth year he was still heard with delight in concert and English opera. He was unrivalled in grace of execution and facility of phrasing. He supported Adelina Patti on her first appearance in the United States. Although he earned great sums during his career, he died in poverty. *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, I, 221.

6. *Flake's Bulletin*, February 19, 1870.

7. *Ibid.*, February 22, 1870.

8. *Galveston News*, May 23, 1871.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, April 1, 1874

11. *Ibid.*, April 4, 1874.

12. Ilma di Murska (1836-1889), a native of Croatia, was described as tall and slender and of striking appearance. Although not especially attractive, she was a woman of great animation and originality. Her impersonations never failed to hold the attention of her audience. She sang the most difficult passages and gave the most florid ornamentation, with sureness and ease. Henry C. Lahee, *Famous Singers of Today and Yesterday* (Boston, 1898), V, 150-157.

13. *Galveston News*, April 2, 3, 1875.

14. Besides Miss Richings [Mrs. Bernard], who was billed as *prima donna assoluta*, members of the Caroline Richings-Bernard opera troupe were listed as Harry Gates, *primo tenore*; John J. Benitz, *basso cantante*; Frank Howard, *basso profondo*; Hattie Moore, *contralto*; Mrs. Henri Drayton, *mezzo-soprano*; Pierre Bernard, tenor. Miss Richings is credited by H. P. Phelps with having organized the first complete English opera company in the United States. *Players of a Century*, 2nd ed. (Albany, 1880), XXI, 272.

15. *Galveston News*, December 8, 1876.

16. *Ibid.*, February 15, 1879.

17. *Kansas City Times* and *Memphis Appeal* as quoted in the *Galveston News*, December 31, 1889.

18. Sadie E. Martin, *The Life and Professional Career of Emma Abbott* (Minneapolis, 1891), XIII, 98.

19. *Ibid.*, XII, 92.

20. Ibid., XII, 96.

21. Etelka Gerster, who was born in Koschau, Hungary, in 1856, was one of the most unfortunate of the great sopranos. While yet a young woman, she lost her voice and had to retire from the stage. Henry C. Lahee, op. cit., VI, 205.

22. Adelina (Adele Maria Clorinda) Patti was born in Madrid on February 19, 1843, and died in 1919. When only four she made her first appearance in public at Tippler Hall, New York. Her first appearance in Italian opera occurred on the 24th of November, 1859, at the Academy of Music in New York, as Lucia. On the 14th of May, 1861, she made her first appearance in London, again in Italian opera, in *La Sonnambula*. *Appleton Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, IV, 675.

23. *Galveston News*, December 24, 1886.

24. Ibid.

25. From a programme in possession of the writer.

26. *Houston Post*, January 13, 1892.

27. *Galveston News*, January 14, 1892.

28. Minnie Hauk [1852-1929], the Baroness de Wartegg, was an American-born prima donna. She made her debut as a "Wonder Child" of sixteen in New York, as Amina in *La Sonnambula*, and her European debut at Paris the following year, in the same role. Miss Hauk was the first American singer to make her debut in Paris. Although qualified and able to sing the *fioratura* or "sky-rocketing" roles, she declared in her memoirs that her "ambition tended toward lyric and dramatic parts, in which I achieved my greatest successes."

One of Miss Hauk's honors during her career was to receive the diploma and decoration of an *Officier d'Académie*, conferred on her by the French government. She was recommended for the award by Ambrose Thomas, Massenet, Delibes, Gounod, and Saint-Saëns. Minnie Hauk, *Memoirs of a Singer* (London, 1925), *passim*.

29. *Galveston News*, March 2, 1884.

30. *Houston Post*, March 8, 1884.

31. The Tavery Company had given *Faust* and *Carmen* at Sweeney and Coombs Opera House in Houston prior to their Galveston visit. The two operas met with pleasing acceptance. *Houston Post*, February, 5, 6, 1895.

32. *Galveston News*, February 7, 1895.

33. Ibid., February 8, 1895.

34. Ibid., February 9, 1895.

35. Henry C. Lahee, op. cit., IX, 301.

36. The diva was accompanied by Mlle. Marie du Bedot, mezzo soprano; Thomas McQueen, tenor; Signor Alberti, baritone; and Mlle. Marie Toulinguet, soprano. *Galveston News*, November 26, 1897.

37. *Galveston News*, November 26, 1897.

38. *Houston Post*, November 30, 1897.

39. In Galveston this year (February 23, 1899) the Scalchi troupe's performance was not well attended. The *News* attributed the lack of interest to tenor Thomas McQueen's "ridiculous efforts at acting" during the company's appearance the year before. *Galveston News*, February 24, 1899.

40. J. S. Gallegly, *Footlights on the Border* (The Hague, 1962), Introduction, p. 18.